

Partitioning Utilities

The right partitioning software can safeguard your data, repair a damaged hard disk and run two operating systems at once. Karl Wright tests five programs that help you take control

You might not think hard disk maintenance is something you're ever likely to get excited about. With a properly organised and maintained hard disk, however, you're far more likely to be able to save your data in the event of a serious system crash.

That's where disk-partitioning utilities come in. Partitioning a hard disk involves dividing it into several segments. Your PC's operating system, normally Windows, then treats each segment, or partition, as a separate hard disk. There are several good reasons for doing this. By storing different types of information on its own partition, you make it easier to find what you want quickly. You may also want to run more than one operating system on a single PC; many partitioning tools come with software that allows you to do this. The most compelling reason is that by placing your data on a different partition to Windows, you're far less likely to lose it in the event of a major system crash.

Choosing... Partitioning Software

There are several partitioning utilities available at the moment, some commercial and some free. Unless you use a particularly exotic operating system, all the products here will support your hard disk's file system, so this isn't an issue.

You need to make sure that the program you choose comes with a rescue disc, which allows you to reverse changes that have made your system unbootable. This may sound like an afterthought, but it's not: it's an absolute necessity. The boot disc should be able to work with all file systems that the main program can.

The program should be easy to use, so that you can get to grips with it quickly. It should include proper warnings and safeguards to ensure that you don't do anything regrettable. Some of the better software can even recover recently deleted partitions. Free partitioning software can often perform only basic operations, such as creating, deleting and resizing partitions. Given that it costs nothing it would be churlish to complain, but for a commercial program to lack advanced features is unforgivable.

Some programs can also change the underlying file system of a partition, from FAT32 to NTFS for instance, without data loss. This is very handy, but sadly not that many programs do it. Finally, some partitioning software also includes advanced maintenance tools. These are handy for avid technophiles, but most users will find them baffling and pointless, so shouldn't make them a major factor in their buying decision.

SYMANTEC PartitionMagic 8

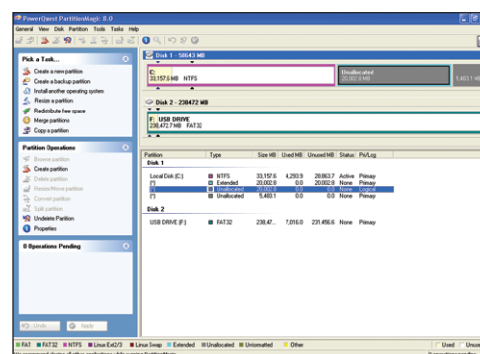
★★★★★

£47 inc VAT

Symantec's PartitionMagic is the best-known partitioning utility. It does everything you'd expect: it creates, deletes, resizes and moves partitions. The program can enlarge an NTFS partition without rebooting, but most other operations require you to restart your PC. One of the program's handiest features is its ability to undelete partitions. Realising you've just deleted your main data partition is terrifying; with this feature you can rectify it.

PartitionMagic can also perform more advanced disk maintenance tasks. It can resize clusters, the smallest unit of storage in a hard disk file system, to minimise wasted space. It can also check for errors and bad sectors on a FAT32 partition. Perhaps its biggest plus point is its ability to convert a partition's file system (such as from FAT32 to NTFS) without wiping the data on that partition. None of its competitors can convert both ways between FAT and NTFS.

PartitionMagic can also copy a partition to an unformatted area of your hard disk. However, copying our 25GB test partition took over an hour. PartitionMagic also had a bit of trouble when we deleted two adjacent partitions. It continued to treat the unformatted space on the hard



▲ You'll find PartitionMagic 8 easy to use and you'll be pleasantly surprised by all it can do

disk as two separate partitions, which was annoying. Disappointingly, PartitionMagic can only split partitions formatted with FAT16 or FAT32, not NTFS (the native file system of Windows XP and Vista). According to Symantec's website, PartitionMagic 8 is not currently compatible with Windows Vista.

PartitionMagic also comes with a boot-loading program, BootMagic. This allows you to install several operating systems on a single PC, each on its own partition. With the rise of virtualisation software, this isn't as much of a selling point as it used to be, but it's still useful.

PartitionMagic is easy to use and has enough built-in checks to make it unlikely that you will accidentally make major changes. It also has all the features it should. However, at this price we'd expect nothing less.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Comprehensive set of features
- ✓ Easy to use
- ✗ Expensive

PARTITIONING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, 150MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 55MB disk space
SUPPLIER <http://uk.insight.com>
DETAILS www.symantec.com

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ACRONIS

Disk Director Suite 10

★★★★★

£15 inc VAT

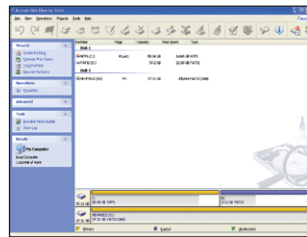


This version of Disk Director looks remarkably similar to PartitionMagic. However, its interface is brighter and cleaner and it presents more options in its main screen.

Disk Director does everything PartitionMagic can, creating, deleting and resizing partitions. It can merge partitions as well as split them, even if they are formatted with different file systems. Unlike PartitionMagic, which can only split FAT16 and FAT32 partitions, Disk Director can split NTFS partitions as well.

Disk Director also offers roughly the same set of advanced features as PartitionMagic. It can change cluster sizes, change the drive letter, copy and recover partitions and check a partition for errors. You can use the advanced Disk Editor, which allows you to edit the properties of the individual sectors and cylinders on your hard disk but for most users this is far too complicated to bother with. Annoyingly, Disk Director can convert only FAT16 to FAT32, and vice versa. These are both older file systems and few will want to convert between them. Disk Director includes a boot loader called OS Selector. Like BootMagic this allows you to run two or more operating systems on the same PC.

Whatever quibbles we had disappeared when we found that you could buy this excellent software for £15 at Amazon.co.uk, which is an incredible deal.



▲ Disk Director Suite 10 is a real bargain and has great features

SUMMARY

- ✓ Comprehensive set of features
- ✓ Incredible value for money
- ✗ Can't convert from FAT32 to NTFS

PARTITIONING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 SE or later, Pentium processor, 128MB RAM
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.acronis.com

VCOM

Partition Commander 10

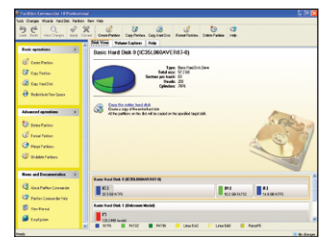
★★★

£30 inc VAT

Partition Commander is far less well known than its competitors. For the most part, however, this shouldn't put you off. It's a well-designed program that's easy to get to grips with, although its interface is a little garish. Inexperienced users will find the comprehensive manual very useful. It not only tells you in detail how the program works, but it also explains the fundamentals of disk partitioning, so you'll know exactly what you're doing.

Like PartitionMagic and Disk Director, this program can do all the basics. It can also copy an entire hard disk, which could be useful if you're upgrading your system disk. Frustratingly, however, it can't split partitions and can only merge partitions with the same file system. Nor can it convert from FAT to NTFS, which is the file conversion that most people will want to make. It doesn't have any sort of boot-loader function, so you can't use it to run several operating systems on your PC. One thing it does have in its favour, though, is that it's the only commercial program here to guarantee compatibility with Windows Vista.

This isn't a bad program. It does what it claims to do, it's easy to use and it costs £17 less than PartitionMagic. However, now that the far superior Acronis Disk Director Suite 10 has dropped in price to only £15, this program has lost its niche in the partitioning software market.



▲ Partition Commander 10 is simpler than its competitors

SUMMARY

- ✓ Easy to use
- ✗ Lacks a boot loader
- ✗ Too expensive

PARTITIONING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 SE or later, Pentium processor, 128MB RAM
SUPPLIER www.gildsoft.co.uk
DETAILS www.v-com.com

GPARTED
GParted

★★★★

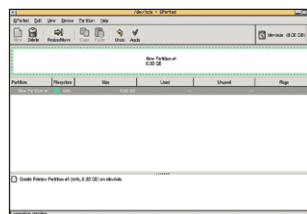
Free

GParted looks and works the same as the other programs here. You can use it to partition any hard disk, no matter which operating system you use, and it's absolutely free.

So what's the catch? Well, you can't install GParted under Windows. It's a Linux program that's been designed as a clone of PartitionMagic. To run GParted, Windows users must download an ISO CD image of the program that they can burn in order to create a bootable disc. With the disc in your CD drive, you start your PC with the BIOS set to boot from your optical drive. GParted then starts automatically, and presents you with an interface that looks almost exactly like PartitionMagic's.

GParted lets you create, delete, resize and move partitions, reset your active partition and check a partition for errors. The program can read all the common file systems and is very robust. During this test, one of our hard disks developed an error that rendered it unbootable. None of the commercial products could help. Using GParted, however, we managed to reset the active partition and get the PC working again.

On the downside, you can't perform advanced operations such as splitting and merging partitions. However, this is an excellent free tool. If you have a one-off partitioning job, don't bother spending money; simply download this instead.



▲ GParted provides all the basic functions you need, for free

SUMMARY

- ✓ Performs most important functions
- ✓ Free to download
- ✗ A little fiddly to learn and use

PARTITIONING SOFTWARE Requires Pentium processor, 128MB RAM
SUPPLIER <http://gparted.sourceforge.net>
DETAILS <http://gparted.sourceforge.net>

EASEUS

Partition Manager 1.6

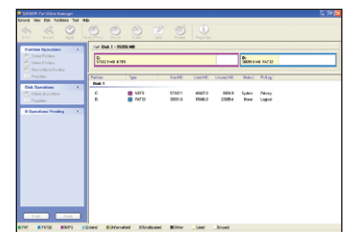
★

£16 inc VAT

Search for partition-management programs on some of the best-known software download sites and you'll find this. At £16 it looks like a bargain, but EASEUS also tries to charge £3.69 for its Extended Download Service (EDS). This lets you download the software again for free within a year. You can remove EDS, but if you lose your download you'll need to pay for Partition Manager again.

Unfortunately, Partition Manager can do only the most basic of partitioning tasks. It can create, delete, move and resize partitions. It can't split or merge partitions, it can't convert from one file format to another and there's no boot loader. Worse still, the bootable rescue disk has an even more basic set of functions. It allows you to create and delete partitions as well as changing your active partition. You can't resize, move, copy or do any of the other tasks that most bootable partitioning discs allow you to do.

We were rather stunned at just what poor value this program is. The few things it does do it does well enough, but there's no way it justifies its price if you need more room. **CS**



▲ There are better programs available than Partition Manager 1.6

SUMMARY

- ✗ Far too expensive
- ✗ Too few features
- ✗ Boot disc not very useful

PARTITIONING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, Pentium processor, 128MB RAM
SUPPLIER www.easeus.com
DETAILS www.easeus.com